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Architecture.

THE UNITED STATES TREASURY BUILDING.

JAMES STUART and NICHOLAS REVETT would never have gone to Athens in 1751, to obtain for publication the accurate measurements and details of the Temples of the Grecian capital, could they have foreseen the disastrous influence of their labors upon architectural art. It is unimportant whether they went as sincere antiquarians, only desirous of revealing to the world, Athenian architecture as it existed in the crumbling temples of the acropolis. Nor do the peculiar beauty and grandeur of Grecian buildings in their fitness to the institutions which called them forth, afford any palliation for the theft. The event occurred at a time when the English mind had been accustomed for more than a century to the Roman architecture as rendered by Jones, Wren, Vanbrugh, and although the palace of Whitehall, as designed by Inigo Jones was scarcely inferior to the court of Farnese, his Somerset House and Greenwich Hospital both excellent; and the work of Sir John Vanbrugh at Blenheim, stamped with inventive genius, yet the style of all these works was a debased one, for its invention was limited to general arrangement, and its spirit was conventional—it was founded on copyism. Its best professors were men of talent and honesty, but they could not penetrate the veil of bigotry which surrounded them. The hackneyed wall-decoration of St. Pauls, and its huge second-story screens, so repugnant to all notions of true Christian architecture, were to be endured for centuries in consequence of the incapacity and prejudice of the times.

The eagerness with which the new work upon the antiquities of Athens was received, was evidence of dissatisfaction with the prevailing taste, and a craving for something better. But the use of the new volumes proved a blight and a curse for the time to all aspirations for real architecture. Men who previously had some slight conceptions of expressions of purpose in building, became ecstatic over the beauties of Classic art, and were never more happy than when mumbling about "Monument of Lysicrates," Parthenon, Erechthum, Propylæa, Temple of Theseus, and Jupiter Olympius. Copyism reigned supreme. A Doric portico was backed up here, and a Corinthian portico there; a dwelling and a church might be adorned with the same Ionic order, the latter designated from the former by a steeple riding astride the roof. To the perpetrators of all this mischief, however, it had never occurred that they had scarcely learned the alphabet of that language so eloquent under the reign of Pericles. They saw no glowing allegory in the tympanum, no battle history in the frieze, no rich coloring under the cornice, in the mouldings, and amid the massive vaultings. They did not know even that what they had so eagerly snatched from the ruins of the acropolis was but the skeleton of a once symmetrical and vital art. But we have suffered more than any other people from this skeleton copyism. In about 1830, the fine old Roman architecture of the Girard Bank, New York City

Hall, and Kings Chapel abdicated in favor of the "orders."

Then sprung into existence such buildings as the New York Custom House and the Philadelphia Mint, State Houses, Banks, churches and dwellings—all began to have pretty much the same external expression. Some were built substantially, others in the most fictitious manner, and many Europeans have been greatly surprised in their first glance at our white marble palaces and equally amused upon learning that the massive pillars were but a delicate thickness of pine. This pestilence continued for about twenty years, manifesting at times, the most singular freaks and virulence. It left many churches and commercial buildings in a ludicrous plight, though probably it was severest in some of its attacks upon private residences.

The Treasury Building at Washington is a legitimate child of the "orders," and may, without doubt, be considered as the most masterly piece of stupidity of all the Government Buildings. The architect of this building was Mr. Robert Mills, who has since died, as rumor says, from mortification at the merited ridicule cast upon the Washington Monument, another sprightly emanation from the same brain. The plan of the building exhibits about as much inventive skill as the treatment of the exterior. When the north and south wings, now under contract, are completed, it will have an unbroken front of four hundred and fifty feet. The end wings and one in the centre of the rear extend back over a hundred feet from the main building. Through the wings and main building runs a narrow corridor with rooms on each side. The whole interior is as plain as a warehouse, and as effective in combinations as a rope-walk. Still it has the merit of fire-proof construction. The front was made without a break in it, probably because the street was straight and did not suggest any departure from this line. Economy might have compelled the sterile treatment of the interior; but if so, why this immense colonnade, measured off by the hundred feet? And here we have the genius, the brain-work of the whole thing. After days and nights of toiling and of thinking, a perfect copy of the "order" was produced; and this was applied by the quantity, an idea vaguely connected with the author's standard of excellence. He doubtless, intended this work for a "stunner," and such it is. The "Minerva Polias" was never so stretched out before.

The entrance—but this was entirely lost sight of in the excitement of the event, for so much colonnade could not be produced without painful effort. As it is, you have to go searching for the entrance, and finally discover some narrow steps leading up by the side of the basement story, near the centre of the colonnade. After landing from these, you can discover a kind of sentry-box against the wall; this is the door-way to the Treasury Building, famed for having an overflowing Treasury. Possibly this entrance was made obscure on purpose, so that it would be difficult for political vultures to find access to the twenty millions surplus. This thought is eminently suggestive, but we must leave it. A Guide Book in speaking of this building, says: "Its portico is of the finest proportions," (an expression somewhat peculiar

to this kind of literature), "and the entire building does great credit to the taste and judgment of the architect." But Capt. Bowman thinks that this building might be improved by marking the entrance in some manner, and in his last report to the Secretary of the Treasury, he suggests the building of an attic story from the front over the centre wing, or a portico projecting in front, for this purpose. If either one of these plans is carried out, we sincerely hope it will be entrusted to some one who has more perception of harmony and consistency in style than the present government architect: Ammi B. Young and Robert Mills in the same building, would be a little too much.

THE PATENT OFFICE is by far the most effective of all the new buildings. This is built two stories high, above a basement in the Doric order, with a wing at each end, projecting one bay, and a portico of eight columns two ranges deep, standing boldly out from the centre. There is no mistake about the entrance in this building. The external walls are relieved by pilasters. The windows are mere fissures, and deficient in size for the purposes of the building. The interior is quite an advance upon the Treasury apartments; a want of light is the prominent defect of the great hall, and this could be remedied by placing a sky-light to each bay of the barred vaulting. The chief merit of this building, however, is a negative one. It has a certain kind of effect which tells well at a distance. On examination it does not possess the least interest. There is not a single line of thought or touch of individual expression about it. When Ithiel Town and A. J. Davis were on the top of the wave, any number of similar looking plans were put through their mill labelled to suit the order.

THE POST OFFICE BUILDING is built in the same convenient style as the buildings above mentioned. It is in the Corinthian order, has a full basement story, with rustic projections, and the wall surface above the basement is relieved by pilasters and fenestral decoration. There are slight projections with a larger bay in the centre marking the entrance, and a level entablature and blocking course, crowning the wall. This is certainly the most sensible of the new government buildings. If it has no art, it has evidence of constructive thought, and such intelligence is preferable to imbecility in art. The expression of purpose in such a building could not go beyond its general character, except in decorative symbolic features about the entrance. But Robert Mills was never guilty of such innovations as these. On the whole, we regard this as a dignified, practical building, suited to its department in character and importance. This building is also to be extended so as to complete the square, in order to accommodate the increasing business of its department. For this purpose, three hundred thousand dollars has already been appropriated, and three hundred more called for by superintendent Meigs in his last report. Captain Bowman estimates the extension to the Treasury building, at seven hundred thousand dollars. The thirty-five custom-houses now constructing under his direction he says will cost over seven millions. With this enormous expenditure of the govern-

ment funds, we would ask in the name of all that is beautiful and classic in builder's art, where is the encouragement to our undeveloped architecture? Where are the best minds in the profession encouraged by this patronage, working out buildings whose excellence shall vie with our mechanic arts, and whose lasting beauty shall attest a rich intelligence and art really worthy of our day?

Correspondence.

ITALY IN 1855-1856.

Rome, 21st January, 1856.

CORNELIUS, the distinguished German painter, who has just received one of the great medals for his cartoons at the Paris Exposition, has been living for two years past in Rome. He is now an old man, but he still occupies himself with his art, and has lately finished a design, which his admirers regard as one of his finest works, and in which, he himself, takes a pleasant unaffected satisfaction. It is now in his studio in the Palazzo Poli.

The work is a highly finished sketch in tempera for a fresco, for the apse of the church proposed to be erected by the royal family of Prussia, in the Campo Lasso at Berlin. It represents the waiting for the Last Judgment, the moment of expectation. The composition is a full, but not complete one. The immense space to be occupied by the fresco, a space of some ninety feet in height (Michael Angelo's Last Judgment is but sixty feet high), affords ample room for many figures, and for the noblest design. Cornelius has introduced, certainly many figures, not fewer than 120.* He has drawn part of his inspiration from the book of Revelations, but the types of the Apocalypse are strangely mingled with the realities of the Gospel, and the tradition of the church.

In the upper centre of the picture is the Saviour, seated in a glory surrounded and supported by seraphs. At his feet are the four beasts of the Apocalypse. At his right stands the Virgin, and opposite to her St. John the Baptist. Immediately above, the figure of Christ, and forming the upper group in the picture, are a band of angels bearing the instruments of the passion, and on either side are the twenty-four elders, in white raiment, casting down their crowns. Beneath these, outside of the Virgin and of St. John, are two rows of figures, the upper representing martyrs, with palms in their hands, the lower apostles and saints.

Beneath the Saviour is a group of angels, of which, the principal figure holds the not yet opened book of life, while the others have the trumpets of judgment in their hands, awaiting for the signal for sounding them to be given. Below, in a band stretching nearly across the picture, are the chief fathers of the Greek and Latin churches. They rest upon a cloud which serves, as it were, for the base of Heaven, but is connected at each end with earth by aerial steps, as if to signify the union of the church in glory above, with the church in struggle below. On these steps at the right

ascends an angel with a censer, from which the smoke of the incense of prayer is rising; below is another angel helping up a penitent, and at the foot is still another defending a child from a serpent that has wound about his leg. On the other side, at the head of the steps, stands the Archangel, Michael, with his sword drawn, waiting for the order of execution—at the foot advancing toward earth, are three angels, one with the crown of thorns, another with the olive of peace, the third with the palm of victory. In the centre of the lower portion of the picture, between the two stairways of cloud, stands a bare, unadorned altar, surmounted by a cross. At the ends of the altar kneel the present King and Queen of Prussia, surrounded at a little distance by the other members of the royal family.

Such is the composition, which by some of the German critics here, is declared to be the most wonderful of the age. But if this description has been at all intelligible, it has made it obvious, that the first essential of a great composition is absent from this—that essential is unity. No common sympathetic action or mutual relation to be recognized by the imagination, can combine these discordant groups into one common interest. The Last Judgment, however unsuitable it may be for painting, and although only adapted to the coarse materialism of the Dark Ages, is at least, a subject controlled by one great motive. The emotions and the incidents belonging to it, are all distinctly referable to a common end and a single overwhelming interest. But to attempt to represent the moment before the judgment, the moment before the action has commenced, is an attempt at once profane and presumptuous. The more labored and elaborate in detail it may be, the more inadequate it is made. This picture is called a work of spiritual art, but let us be careful in the use of words; is it not rather a work of positive materialism?

No one ever looked at Michael Angelo's Last Judgment, to have his conceptions of the awful day exalted or enlarged. To feel the power even of this most muscular of pictures, one must forget the subject; and look only at the separate figures as studies of anatomy and of drawing. One leaves the Sistine Chapel with no religious awe, with no sense of exaltation; but simply with a clearer acquaintance with Michael Angelo's unparalleled force as a draughtsman, and the conviction that the power exerted by the artist, produces no corresponding effect upon the spectator, when that power is employed upon a subject, before which, all human strength is weakness, and the clearest human conceptions only folly and confusion. But when one looks at this work of Cornelius, one finds not even that excellence in detail, which might awaken an interest in the separate portions of the unconnected whole. It possesses no beauty of color, and no such preëminence in drawing, as to give it any peculiar claim to admiration.

But, moreover, it is one of those pictures which have so far lost the characteristics of pictorial art, as to require an explanation in words of its meaning—not merely of its meaning in details, for explanation of these is of course required in many of the greatest pictures; but explanation of its main object and purpose. However attentively it may be studied, it does not explain itself.

What is the event for which all these figures are gathered together? No figure, no action, no gesture indicates it. If you have seen other pictures, you may guess that it has something to do with the Judgment; or you may be told, what it is by some person who has learned. But who are awaiting judgment? Are the doctors of the church who sit on the cloud to escape the terrible day? Is the penitent whom the angel leads up the steps, already judged and pardoned? Is Michael, the Archangel, waiting with drawn sword to descend upon the royal family of Prussia, who are the only people visible on earth? What bold and empty absurdity! But King Frederick William in uniform here! Cornelius may excuse himself by referring to the early masters, who insert the portraits of their patrons in their most sacred pictures. But there is no parallel. In the one case it was honest superstition commingling with vanity of the patrons' part, that led to such a course; but in this latter instance there is nothing better than the flattery of a courtier and the degradation of an artist.

In the pictures by the old masters, in which a story is treated in episodes, the idea of unity in the general design is lost sight of in the desire to convey the meaning more strongly; by the introduction of various incidents, sometimes disconnected in time and place with each other, sometimes the successive scenes of a continuous story. These are narratives in painting instead of in words, and belonged to that age when pictures supplied the want of books, and when the object and limits of art were most imperfectly understood. But the separate groups in this fresco of Cornelius, although remote from each other in all natural relations, have no episodic character. None of them are complete in themselves, and yet many have so little bearing upon the general design, that one after another might be struck out, and no want would be felt.

It is hardly necessary to examine the originality of a work like this. The main idea is not a new one in Art; and the arrangement reminds one, in portions of the Disputa of Raphael, and in portions of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel.

So long a discussion of this picture as we have entered upon here, would have served little purpose, were it not a type of many works of recent art, and especially of some of the most celebrated of the present German schools. This fresco may or may not be soon forgotten; but the school of which Cornelius has long been the acknowledged head, will, for some time, at least, contrive to exercise an effect more or less powerful upon the progress and prospects of art. The sooner the falseness of the principles upon which it has proceeded, and the consequent comparative worthlessness of its results, are exposed and understood, the better will it be, not merely for Art, but for Religion.

* One of the latest examples of its use, is that of a statue of the Archangel sitting in expectation, with the trumpet of Judgment in his hands, by Tenerani. It forms a portion of the monument of the Princess Lante, in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. It is a simple and striking work. "Especto domini veniis imitatio mea."

* There are 126.